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ABSTRACT

The possibility exists that another language resource, the Spanish language of the Mexican American, will be lost in the United States due to language ethnocentrism. Mexican American bilingualism is viewed as an intellectual handicap by public educators who do not understand the basic linguistic bias of instruments utilized to measure the intellectual development of Mexican Americans. Educational systems have discouraged Mexican American bilingualism by placing restrictions on the use of Spanish in the public schools and by failing to implement bilingual-bicultural programs for Mexican Americans. What is now necessary is the articulation and adoption of public school acculturation policies that allow these students to retain their bicultural heritage and language and to obtain the necessary academic skills to succeed in the American mainstream. There is an imminent need for preservice and inservice teachereducation programs that clarify the philosophy and objectives of bilingual and multicultural education programs and that orient public educators to the phenomenon of language variations and their effect on learning styles. A shift to acculturation policies in public education would benefit everyone. (TS)

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MEXICAN AMERICAN BILINGUALISM AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ETHNOCENTRISM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Language ethnocentrism is not new to the culture of the United States. Almost every immigrant group that transplanted to the country discovered the necessity to learn the English language and abandon the native, old country language. Fishman, in his now classic study of bilingualism and language loyalty in the United States, documented the recurring chronicle of the immigrant groups that came to the country, adopted its official language, and lost their native tongue (1). For a variety of reasons encompassing the political, the social, and the economic realms, the immigrant groups quickly assimilated into the English speaking culture by demonstrating a two-pronged willingness to learn English and abandon the previous language. The result of such a pattern was second and third generation monolingualism in which the immigrant groups came to accept a monolingual, English-only status in the culture.

English language ethnocentrism-- the attitude that Standard School English is superior to any other dialect-- was so apparent to the immigrant peoples that swift eradication of any "foreign speech accents" became the password for entry into the American mainstream. English language ethnocentrism still prevails in the country. It is most perverse in public

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education, emerging from the attitudes of public educators who determine the policies and practices of the public schools; it is most perverse because it impedes the educational development and social advancement of a significant number of students who are powerless to combat the ethnocentrism.

What follows is an analysis of the areas in public education where English language ethnocentrism impedes the educational development of Mexican American students. Understand that although public educators are indicted for their language ethnocentrism, this is not an attempt to muddy murky water; it is an attempt to clarify issues surrounding Mexican Americans bilingualism and English language ethnocentrism by way of analyses of public school policies and practices. Better understanding of the issues should enhance decisions regarding the language and educational development of Mexican American students in public education. Recommendations for constructive change terminate the essay.

Overview of the Problem

The possibility exists that another language resource will be lost to the country due to language ethnocentrism, the native Spanish language of the Mexican American. Not only would this be a devastating loss to the Mexican American, (the Mexican American is the largest bilingual ethnic group in the country), but it would also be detrimental to the country's attempts at rapprochement with Latin America and other Third World powers. Yet, although there is an awakening interest in the Spanish-English bilingualism of the Mexican American, and although federal monies

are provided to facilitate the Mexican American's bilingualism through bilingual education, only 2.2 percent of all Mexican American students in the country are involved in such programs. Worse yet, only sixty-five percent of all Mexican Americans ever graduate from high school, and many of those who do graduate with minimal language arts skills.

For the Mexican American the experience of language ethnocentrism has been similar to that of the immigrant groups-- with one notable exception. The Mexican American was not originally an immigrant to this country. He did not migrate to this country with the intentions of becoming an American by learning the English language nor was his language (Spanish) imported to this country. Both his language and culture were well established in the Southwest before the Declaration of Independence was conceived and signed. In fact, Spanish was the official language of Mexican American people of the Southwestern United States until the conquest of the territory by the United States government as a consequence of the Mexican American War with Mexico, The Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty, which ceded the Southwest to the United States government in 1848, guaranteed the Mexican American all the rights of U.S. citizenship, presumably the right to retain Mexican Spanish. Because treaty guarantees are construed to be constitutional guarantees, i.e., the supreme law of the land, the Mexican American anticipated a bilingual-bicultural status, one in which Mexican culture and language would retain a position of respect (2).

From the inception of his tenure as a U.S. citizen, the Mexican American anticipated that English and Spanish would be the official languages of the Southwest. In the beginning, this was the case for a period of time; for example, the New Mexico Constitution, other public documents, and civic affairs were bilingual. Court sessions and elections were conducted in Spanish and English. Yet, as Anglo Americans migrated

to the Southwest, the official language of the region shifted to English; English dominated to the extent that Spanish was not only relegated to an inferior social position but it was also banned in public education as a medium of instruction. Thus, for social, economic and legal reasons, the Mexican American was compelled to learn a new language, English, and was encouraged to forget his native Spanish--he was encouraged to forget the first European language spoken in the present United States in direct violation of his constitutional guarantee to a bilingual citizenship. This condition was not acceptable to the Mexican American. He tenaciously retained Spanish while he learned English.

The Mexican American developed a bilingual language strategy that provided communication skills for mobility in both the Anglo and Mexican American communities. To this day, the Mexican American has never given much thought to the multi-lingual demands placed on him by his society. The Mexican American contemplates little on the need to speak Spanish to the viejos, grandparents, a street calo, or dialect, to his peers, School English in school, and back to Spanish for various social occasions. Yet, Mexican American bilingualism has never been fully appreciated by those in public education. In fact, there has been a widely held assumption among public educators that the bilingualism of the Mexican American is detrimental to his language development and educational achievement in the public schools (3). The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in its survey of public educators in the Southwest, reported that "bilingualism" and "language deficiencies" were purportedly the causes for the low academic achievement levels of Mexican American students (4). To understand the Mexican American experience with public education, one must understand the posture public education (and public educators) have held toward Mexican American bilingualism.

For a time that is longer than it is tolerable, School English enthnocentrism has been an albatross hovering over the shoulders of public educators and Mexican American students alike. Public educators have held that English is the only language appropriate as a medium of instruction, and in this vein, the only language appropriate for the culture of the United States. To this day, oral drills on correct School English pronunciation and proper grammatical usage are a common experience to most Mexican American students although research on this sort of practice has been identified as counter-productive, and for the most part, needlessly wasteful of important class time (5). Nevertheless, Mexican American students are subjected to memorization of long lists of English vowel sounds that do not appear in Spanish in hopes of eradicating the student's "accent." Not only is this type of drill unrealistic but it also attempts to change a rather superficial aspect of oral discrimination of vowel sounds. Because much valuable time is spent on these types of compensatory or remedial activities, the Mexican American is rarely treated for more significant aspects of language development.

There is no question that the Mexican American speaks a distinct caló, or dialect, of English that has been identified as a primarily phonological and morphological variation of School English (6). The Mexican American does speak English with distinct intonational patterns that are more Spanish than English. He tends to hispanicize English words, as when he says "trucka" for "truck" and he tends to anglicize Spanish words, as when he says "planching" for ironing or planchando in Spanish. The English caló is a natural consequence of living in a bilingual community where attributes of both languages are incorporated into the speech patterns of the bilingual. There is no question that the Mexican American population

consists of speakers who range from monolingual English-speakers to completely bilingual Spanish-English speakers with a multiplicity of language proficiencies within this range. What must be called to question is the ethnocentric attitude that public educators have held toward the bilingualism of the Mexican American.

Mexican American Bilingualism and Intellectual Inferiority

Mexican American bilingualism has been viewed as an intellectual handicap by public educators. The attitude persists among school teachers, both Anglo and Mexican American, that the Spanish home language of the Mexican American student is a handicap that dooms the student to academic failure, an attitude that has relegated Mexican American students to classes for the educable mentally retarded (EMR) because many teachers have equated School English ability to intellectual ability (7). "Educable mentally retarded" generally means mildly retarded in which a student is between two and three standard deviations below the mean. Mexican Americans are overrepresented in these classes; they are two times as likely to be placed in EMR classes, as compared to their monolingual peers, telling them that they cannot compete in the mainstream classrooms, and that they have little chance of competing in the mainstream society. Legislation in California was necessary to protect Mexican American students from the bilingual-mentally retarded practice of EMR placement (8).

What persists among public educators is confusion regarding the ostensibly detrimental effects of bilingualism on the Mexican American's intellectual development. Carter, in his survey of public educators and Mexican American bilingualism, reported that a majority of Southwestern teachers and school administrators deemed bilingualism a mentally confusing liability for the Mexican American student. The student's low I.Q. pro-

file and low reading test scores were used as evidence to support the assumption that bilingualism, per se, is detrimental to the student's intellectual development (9). However, objective studies on the Mexican American's intellectual development report that his low I.Q. profiles have little to do with his cognitive abilities and more to do with linguistically and culturally biased I.Q. tests (10). Other studies report that the condition of bilingualism was not an inhibiting factor to intellectual development, as indicated by the student's performance on various I.Q. instruments, when socio-economic variables were carefully controlled. (11).

School English ethnocentrism has prevented educators from understanding the basic linguistic bias of the instruments utilized to measure the intellectual development of Mexican Americans. Much concern has been expressed regarding the construct validity and the item reliability of such instruments when used with Mexican Americans, but little or no concern has been expressed regarding the School English in which the instruments are written. The semantics of School English can in no way be considered objective; the Mexican American student brings to School English a semantic influence by his knowledge of Spanish, Chicano English, and School English. The all-American "hotdog" in School English (an ostensibly relevant item to a school age youngster) may connote a "bitch in heat" since the School English idiom "hotdog" does not exist in Spanish.Little or no research has been conducted on the cross-cultural semantic differences that the Mexican American student brings to School English. Intuitively, there is no reason to doubt that cross-cultural semantic differences should occur, but until empirical studies report some indication of cross-cultural semantic differences or similarities, instruments that utilize School English for cognitive or achievement

assessment must be viewed skeptically when used with Mexican American students. The view that School English is an objective tool for measuring intellectual development in the public schools is a view that precludes the very real notion that the intellingenceinstrument reads differently to the Mexican American student.

Mexican American Bilingualism and Illiteracy

Public educators have associated Mexican American bilingualism with illiteracy. It seems inconsistent in a society that admires, indeed venerates the erudite bi-and multi-lingual person (note that those bilinguals who escorted President Nixcn in China were highly praised) that public educators would associate bilingualism with illiteracy. Yet, in that many of the Mexican American students in their schools were illiterate in two languages, Spanish and English (12).

Purportedly, the Mexican American student is neither an English nor a Spanish speaker; he is non-lingual in that he is considered illiterate in both languages. This view is supported by the early research that was conducted on the disadvantaged student which reported that minority students, including Mexican Americans, were not verbally responsive to the questions posed to them by adult, Anglo researchers (13). What the early research failed to perceive is the linguistic legitimacy of the calo, or dialect, of the Mexican American which is capable of conveying abstract discourses as is any other dialect (14). One only needs to hear Mexican American students on the school grounds and in their classes to recognize that they are neither non-lingual nor illiterate in either language.

The attitude that Mexican American students are non-lingual and illiterate in two languages reflects an ethnocentric attitude toward any

language variation of School English. Public educators who are not adequately trained in language variations and dialectology are bound to reflect an ethnocentric attitude toward a calo that is different from their own, a posture that is understandably defensive of School English. Understand, of course, that the posture places Mexican Americans at odds with public educators; rejection of the calo of the Mexican American is in a very real sense rejection of his culture since his language is the carrier of the culture. Further, the ethnocentric posture creates relatively low teacher or self-expectations that become self-fulfilling prophecies (15).

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights conducted a study on the verbal behavior of teachers toward Mexican American and Anglo students. Using Flanders system of interaction analysis, the Commission found that the teachers were communicating less with Mexican Americans, that the teachers were praising Mexican Americans less, and the teachers were posing less difficult cognitive questions to Mexican American students when compared to the teachers' verbal behavior toward the Anglo students (16). Even under a research situation, the teachers could not conceal a School English ethnocentrism, no doubt an unconscious attitude on their part that prevented them from communicating more equitably with the Mexican American students. Regrettably, students come to see themselves in the classroom setting as their teachers behave toward them. Teachers who view the Mexican American as non-lingual will tend to produce a student who is non-lingual in School English-- and this is saying little of the damage that is done to the student's self-esteem when he experiences linguistic rejection simultaneous with the low teacher and self-expectations nurtured by School English ethnocentrism.

Mexican American Bilingualism and School Programs and Policies

Educational systems have discouraged Mexican American bilingualism by placing restrictions on the use of Spanish in the public schools and by failing to implement bilingual-bicultural programs for the Mexican American. The most notorious school policy that has discouraged bilingualism is the "No Spanish" rule which prohibits the Mexican American from speaking Spanish on school premises. A commission report indicates that many schools in the Southwest still prohibit the use of Mexican American Spanish in the public schools. Educators believe that a prohibition on Spanish will enhance the assimilation of the Mexican Americans into an English speaking society; the educators argue that 1) School English is the official language of the country, 2) the best way to learn School English is to forget Mexican American Spanish, 3) Mexican American bilingualism deters positive intellectual development, and 4) public educators do not understand Spanish. Mexican American students who are caught in the act of speaking Spanish are subjected to various questionable indignities, such as detention in a Spanish-detention room or composition of an essay on the merits of only speaking English (17).

The "No Spanish" rule, which is by now dying the death of benign neglect, is not based on research that would lend support to the argument that the best way to learn School English is to forget Mexican American Spanish. Instead, it is based on the School English ethnocentrism of public educators who for the most part do not know Spanish and who sincerely feel that School English is the only acceptable language of instruction in public schools, a feeling that was once supported by law. A recent survey of States that restrict the use of any language, other than English, as a medium of instruction in public schools reports that now

only one State of the fifty holds such a restriction. Although some States have chosen to simply ignore the English-only statute, others have chosen to amend the statute to allow bilingual instruction in public schools (18).

The possibility exists that public educators are beginning to view policies of acculturation, i.e., policies that would allow Mexican American students to learn in Spanish so that they may retain their Mexican-Anglo biculturalness, as viable solutions to the problems School English ethnocentricism has precipitated. However, public educators are moving slowly toward bilingual-bicultural education programs for Mexican Americans. Bilingual-bicultural programs to accommodate Mexican American students have been implemented for only 2.7 percent of the Mexican American student population, although federal funds for bilingual programs are available under several federal legislations including Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary School Act (19).

Ultimately, the English-only assimilationistic policies, as reflected by the No-Spanish rules, have not adequately provided the Mexican American instruction in the English language arts. By the twelfth grade 63 percent of the Mexican American student population is reading six months below the national norm, with 24 percent of these still reading at the ninth grade level or below. Only 5.5 percent of the Mexican American students receive some form of English as a Second Language instruction. Less than 2 percent of all teachers of Mexican American students are assigned to English as a Second Language program, and most of these teachers have miminal training in English as a Second Language methodology (20).

Toward a Solution

School English ethnocentrism is indicative of assimilationistic policies in public education which have attempted to melt all foreign language speakers into speaking only School English. The Mexican American has resisted such policies by tenaciously maintaining his bilingualism. Unfortunately, the policies, and the Mexican American's resistance to such policies, have mitigated against the Mexican American because the focus of attention by public educators has been on eradicating the Mexican American's bilingualism instead of utilizing it as a practicable resource and tool of instruction.

What is now necessary is the articulation and adoption of acculturation public school policies that allow the student to retain his bicultural heritage and language as well as obtain the necessary academic skills to succeed in the American mainstream. Such policies would benefit all students. Mexican American students could find satisfaction and success in public education when recognition is given to their background in language and culture. Anglo students could find new channels of educational opportunity -- the opportunity to learn about Latino cultures and to speak Spanish, and eventually other languages. As an international force, our country can no longer afford the luxury of a monolingual citizenry. Policies of acculturation would simply utilize an untapped linguistic and cultural resource to the benefit of all school youngsters.

Public educators are not entirely to blame for assimilationistic policies. Teacher education trained them to teach a monolithic student population, a population that exists only in the minds of melting pot theorists. Teacher education must now address itself to students who manifest multiple ethnic, cultural, and racial diversities. The same

arguments posed against School English and Mexican American bilingualism could be posed by Black, Indian, or other ethnic minority educators who have experienced the shock of linguistic rejection. There is an imminent need for pre- and in-service teacher education programs that:

--clarify the philosophy and objectives of bilingual and multi-cultural education programs based on an acculturation premise;

--orient public educators to the phenomenon of language variations, dialectal diglossia and their effects on learning styles.

A shift to acculturation policies in public education is most essential if public educators wish to evade the albatross of School English ethnocentrism. As the impetus of bilingual-bilcultural education gains momentum, and as the research on such programs is conducted and disseminated, there is some hope for a shift from School English ethnocentrism to bilingual acceptance on the part of public educators, a shift that will benefit public education and the Mexican American student. Until that shift occurs, the Mexican American student will remain linguistically isolated from public education.

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